

Honduras Coup: Template for a Hemispheric Assault on Democracy

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The people of Honduras have now suffered more than 40 days of military rule. The generals' June 28 coup, crudely packaged in constitutional guise, ousted the country's elected government and unleashed severe, targeted, and relentless repression.

The grassroots protests have matched the regime in endurance and outmatched it in political support within the country and internationally. Its scope and duration is unprecedented in Honduras history. Popular resistance is the main factor affecting the international forces attempting to shape the outcome of the governmental crisis. It weighs heavy on the minds of the coup's authors and their international backers.

As Eva Golinger has convincingly [documented](#)¹, the United States took part in conceiving, planning, and staging the coup. The U.S. ambassador in Tegucigalpa, Hugo Llorens, coordinates a team of high-ranking U.S. and Honduran military officials, and creatures from the old Bush administration, using the Soto Cano (Palmerola) U.S. air force base.

But when the army, machine guns blazing, assaulted President Zelaya's house, kidnapped him, and dumped him in Costa Rica - still in pajamas - their actions forged unprecedented unity in Latin America and the Caribbean against the coup regime, and enraged hundreds of thousands within the country.

Latin American unity

In the first days after the coup, it appeared that the whole world denounced the Honduran generals and their civilian front men. ALBA - the nine-nation Bolivarian alliance initiated by Venezuela and Cuba - took the initiative in uniting Latin American governments around a common stand. Nicaragua's capital, Managua, became the temporary capital of Our America. Many Latin American presidents knew only too-well that they could soon suffer Zelaya's fate.

Argentina's Cristina Fernandez devoted her entire speech to this theme at the OAS general assembly, which took a unanimous stand against the golpistas (coupsters). That was followed quickly by a UN General Assembly meeting, convened by its president Father Miguel d'Escoto (a veteran Nicaraguan Sandinista leader), which also passed a unanimous resolution repudiating the coup and recognizing Zelaya as the legitimate president of Honduras.

Faced with this reality, the U.S. government hastened to portray itself as a key opponent of the military take-over and a supporter of Zelaya's return. It was politically urgent for the Obama regime, not only in Latin America but domestically, to disclaim involvement in the

coup.

There has been much speculation that Obama disagrees with his government's duplicitous policy on the coup, and of course that cannot not be excluded. But what counts for the people of Honduras and their supporters is not Obama's possible private opinions but his government's actions. Its walk betrayed its pronouncements.

The U.S. has not acted to cut the legs out from under the coup regime. It could topple the coup with a five-minute phone call that included a few bottom-line dollar figures. Its words, as time has shown, were mainly those of deceit and of manipulation of different forces acting on the Honduran crisis.

Main aims of the coup

Washington staged the coup to promote a number of closely related aims:

- To strike a blow at the ALBA alliance, by taking out its assumed "weakest link" - Honduras and its member government headed by Zelaya.
- To prepare for an assault on revolutionary Venezuela, prefaced by the announcement of new U.S. military bases that will convert Colombia into a gigantic aircraft carrier and platform for staging hostile operations against ALBA countries, with Ecuador and Bolivia also high on the list.
- To "take back" Honduras, and again use it as a platform to strike out against leftwing presidencies and mass movements in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and to demoralize and discourage grassroots support for those disobedient or defiant regimes.
- To test Latin America's turbulent waters for a revival of coup-making in Latin America and the Caribbean, and to use it as a laboratory for coup-making in 21st-Century conditions. This involves attempting to re-inspire and regroup rightwing political and military supporters across the hemisphere. It also tested where the powerful Catholic Church would stand. (A free Bible if you guess right!)
- To probe South America's "soft underbelly" - mainly Brazil and Chile - to see if they were amenable to a deal, or at least could be bribed into silence. The goal is to drive a wedge between the ALBA Alliance and so-called centre-left regimes (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Chile).

Since then, a lot of water has gone down the Rio Coco (between Honduras and Nicaragua).

The coup regime threatened to become a millstone around Washington's neck and hinder its renewed drive to find leverage and points of support, especially in South America. Hence Washington's efforts for plausible denial, and lack qualms about letting the golpistas hang out to dry if necessary.

Latin American unity is now being sorely tested by the provocative decision to place U.S. military air and naval bases in Colombia. While both Brazil and Chile have reluctantly bowed down with the argument the issue is a "sovereign" decision for Colombia, others like Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Cuba have denounced the move.

An effective resistance

Meanwhile, the Honduran resistance has had immense impact on the population, the regime, the national and regional economy, and international opinion. This outcome is horrifying the local ruling class and Washington.

The Honduran economy is in tatters. Import-export activity is down an estimated 60 per cent. Zelaya reported in a press conference in Mexico City that over 200 road barricades had been erected, most of them heavily repressed by the army in an attempt to keep produce moving. Public schools have not functioned since the coup because of teachers' strikes and student boycotts. Health workers have maintained a long strike, and many other work centres have been hit by shorter strikes and slowdowns.

The de facto government has been unable to meet payrolls, and the profits of the ten ruling families are starting to dry up. ADIDAS, NIKE, and GAP – flagships of the maquila sector – have urged the U.S. government to accelerate Zelaya's return because their products are not being exported, and they are losing millions. The crisis is also hitting Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran import-export enterprises that depend on the northern Honduran port of Cortés for commerce with the eastern and southern U.S. and Europe.

Yet despite stiff resistance and surprises on the international front, de facto President Roberto Micheletti's "government" has not collapsed. Its main weapon, aside from Catholic Church sermons and virtual monopoly control over media, has been targeted killings and arrests of unarmed protesters, who take nothing to their actions but conviction, courage, and picket signs. Disappearances and torture are selectively carried out, the right to free movement permanently violated, and curfews are often lengthened.

The regime has now moved to close down Globo Radio, the only station that has dared to oppose the coup, support Zelaya as the country's legitimate president, and give the resistance a voice. It is still on the air as of August 6, surrounded by hundreds of supporters as defense guards. If the regime hangs on, it will likely also close down TV Choluteca Sur (Channel 36/34) which works closely with Globo.

The Arias Plan

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias's plan for ending the coup and restoring "stability" to Honduras should be called the "Obama-Clinton-Lula Plan." Santiago O'Donnell, regular journalist for the Argentine Pagina 12, wrote on July 26 that the Arias Plan was traced out in a Moscow meeting between Lula and Obama. According to O'Donnell, "Lula wanted Zelaya to return and Obama wanted him not to remain in power. So they came to agreement: Zelaya would return but would not remain in power." The plan's evident, but unstated intent was to keep Zelaya from exercising any real power and block any possible return to office in the future. And, above all, to weaken the mass resistance movement. The two presidents met again at the G-8 summit in Italy.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chose Arias, whose skills in serving imperialism won him a Nobel Peace prize, to host talks between the Zelaya government (in-exile) and the coup leaders. He "mediated" in San José between representatives of "both sides." With the OAS pushed out of the picture, the talks moved away from the demand for the immediate and unconditional return of Zelaya, to a framework of conditional and delayed return (and thus the conditioned and delayed retirement of the de facto regime).

The talks began as a means to delay Zelaya's return and to buy time for the coup regime, in

the hope it could stabilize its rule within the country. Zelaya accepted the Plan as a basis for discussion. But talks soon collapsed, because the coup regime categorically rejected Zelaya's return . A second attempt by Arias failed for the same reason.

Zelaya then turned away from the Arias exercise and began again to refocus on building the resistance and on diplomatic outreach. His government in exile operates mainly on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border (Ocotal), and at the Honduran embassy in Managua.

Impact of resistance

Mass opposition resumed, inspired by Zelaya's attempts to return via the Nicaraguan border, and by the effective work done by his wife (Xiamara Castro de Zelaya) within the country. This had its effect. Obama declared more pointedly that the coup regime had to accept Zelaya's return through the San José-Arias path. Brazil and Mexico backed this stance, as did OAS General Secretary Insulza.

The coup regime continues to reject this course. On the heels of Obama's statement, Jose Miguel Insulza, Oscar Arias, and Spanish vice-president Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega proposed sending an OAS ministerial-level delegation to Honduras to try to convince the military regime to accept Zelaya's return, and perhaps try to extract more teeth from Zelaya. Coup leader Micheletti said he would accept such a delegation only if no ministers from ALBA countries were included. The mission, which will arrive on Aug 11 is made up of foreign ministers of Argentina, Mexico, Canada, Costa Rica, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic, accompanied by José Miguel Insulza of the OAS.

Meanwhile, Zelaya has agreed to major concessions. He has accepted the principle of a national unity government, whose main task would be to stabilize the country, get the economy moving again, restore services such as education and health, and organize the November national elections.

In essence, Zelaya's team feels it has no choice but to accept a deal that will leave it weakened and hand-tied, in a government that includes major figures of the coup. The authors of the Arias Plan hope this would leave the ruling class and the army with significant leverage to politically defeat the mass movement and the Zelaya current in the coming elections. That is not certain.

In a press conference in Mexico during his state visit this week, Zelaya sent a message to Washington and other hemispheric governments - either golpismo (coup making) by the extreme right will be contained, or Latin America's left-wing guerrillas will be reborn. He again asserted the people's right to insurrection under conditions of military dictatorship.

To the grassroots

Anyone who leaves the mass movement out of their calculations may come up short. The resistance movement has emerged as a new force, much more sophisticated and powerful than before June 28. Activists have been through a particularly acute and brutal school of class struggle. The growing unity between mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-Honduran peoples augurs well. Their international ties are more varied and stronger than before.

The Zelaya current itself is not the same as it was before the coup. There is every possibility that the interim period, with or without Zelaya's return, can be used to mature and consolidate this movement and to build its capacity to take on the ruling class in the

electoral process and the ongoing battle of for the hearts and minds of the great majority of the nation.

The next Day of Action is Aug 11, when marches from all over Honduras will converge on the industrial centre San Pedro Sula and the capital Tegucigalpa. Hondura's National Resistance Front has appealed for simultaneous solidarity protests around the world on that day.

The outcome depends, above all, on the ability of the grassroots to remain on guard and active in political struggle. Their activity will likely unfold under the twin banners of an election campaign and building support for convoking a Constituent Assembly.

Anti-imperialist fighters should focus on defending the mass movement and its leaders in Honduras, and the goal of continental unity of Our America against imperial domination.

The Honduran coup of June 28 was an imperial dress rehearsal, a test for the coup instigators and for all of Latin America. Above all, the coup is a school for the Honduran grassroots. No matter what short term twists and turns the contending forces may take, Hondurans will never be the same.

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